

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

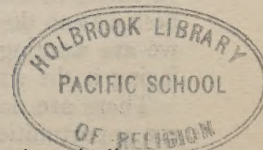
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

Number 106

October, 1945

COMMUNITY

By Leslie Stubbings*



FOREWORD

Comradeship of Peace

1.

If we could look down on Britain from some remote region of the stratosphere we might see it as it really is—"a sceptred isle set in a silver sea." And what we would be looking down upon would be a community with centuries of history behind it. Supposing then that we drop in wide spirals to the height of only a few thousand feet, we discover that this bird's-eye island of ours is clustered from end to end with cities, towns, villages. Each of these too is a community: some with a long tradition; some only newly born.

Seeking some convenient landing ground we come at last to earth on the outskirts of one of these villages. Evening is falling and we set out in search of shelter for the night. Asking our road from a late-homing villager we come on hospitality in a friendly inn or a kindly cottage. And here in the community of the fireside we arrive at last at the heart of it all: the group of neighbours, the family circle, the gathering of friends; the living, diverse, characterful folk who are the soul of every kind of community: out of whom is shaped the character of the village, of the neighbourhood, of the region and of the kingdom itself; by whom this character is developed.

2.

Here, in this little group around a fire, is where comradeship comes alive—not in some impersonal

* Mr. Stubbings is the Hon. Secretary of The Community Advisory Group, Chancton, Dartnell Park, West Byfleet, Surrey, England. "This is a voluntary advisory group, non-political and non-sectarian. It is not concerned to further any particular movement and is unsupported by any fund. Its work is concerned with (a) making available the findings of experimental community activities in various fields; (b) putting those interested into touch with individuals, groups and movement having specialised knowledge and experience; (c) providing a liaison with groups and activities which offer opportunities for the active co-operation of ex-service men and women or which suggest some parallel for similar types of effort; (d) offering a medium of contact and comradeship as between like-minded people." The material in this bulletin was taken from *COMRADESHIP CONTINUED* published by The Community Advisory Group. Grateful acknowledgment is made to Mr. Stubbings for its use.

territory lying like a coloured map in the mind's eye with its population trailing a procession of noughts across its face; not in the plan of a town with its gridiron pattern of streets, its shopping centre and its by-pass road; not in any tidy graph showing in painted curves the distribution of workers over an industrial area.

The map, the plan and the graph are dead things and without meaning until they find their meaning in the lives of people, in the happiness of people, in the homes and firesides of people. Yes, of people: not "the people" but just *people*—individual persons: you and me and the folks next door. It is people who matter. The plans are made for people; not people for the plans.

3.

The word community will have no meaning here in these pages that does not refer back to that little neighbourly group of people around a fire. It concerns the relationship of people to one another: their comradeship, their sense of togetherness; their capacity for giving the glad hand when things are good and the helping hand when they're not.

That kind of comradeship comes easily in emergency and when danger and disaster are just round every corner as they have been for so many people in so many places for so many years past; when the first concern is for the man who goes down; and when short rations are shared.

Somehow, when it's all over and things ease up and we can all draw breath again and think of the future—somehow, then, that ready comradeship seems so often to disappear too. "Business as usual" takes over once more and the other fellow must look after himself.

4.

But if there's going to be any better way of life anywhere after the war—let alone a better Britain or a better world—we shall have to hold tight to that generous fellowship; to remember that the struggle is still on; that we're still all in it together. Things are not going to be easy for many and they will be pretty grim for some. The comradeship of the air raid shelter—for that will serve as well as any other

symbol—is still the biggest and best thing that is left us. If we lose that, we lose the peace, whatever else we may get or not get. And no planning, no Act of Parliament, no organisation, are able alone to make good the loss.

Comradeship grows of itself, freely out of our own goodwill; out of the realisation that we have to see things through together in peace as well as in war.

5.

For some of us that may point to one job of work, one sort of service, one way of life; for others it may mean quite a different one. It will depend very much on where we find ourselves, how we are “fixed,” what best we can do—most of all it will depend on where we are wanting to get to. For the direction we are facing is the way we shall travel.

There are no blueprints for fellowship. But there are opportunities everywhere for those who are looking for them. Community grows out of itself and almost any simple thing will give it a start. It needs only that it shall bring us together in goodwill for the service of our neighbour, of the group, of the community and not simply for some little self-seeking hole-and-corner interest or personal advantage of our own; it will do just as long as it helps us to share our interests instead of closing them around ourselves; to make common cause in our work, our play, our religious worship.

6.

Work? Community in terms of daily work seeks the end of the beggar-my-neighbour struggle that leaves one man in a job and another in the bread line. It takes “each for all and all for each” as its working principle. It wants to put back the satisfaction of achievement and the pride of the job into the daily work instead of making human beings into the bored and disgruntled cogs of the machine that employs them. It stands for better work instead of just a bigger profit; for work in which the character of the craftsman and the personality of the worker are not wholly ironed out into a dead level of mass-produced uniformity; for work in which the maker and the user can both take pleasure.

But these are things that can be realised only as we *want* them so—and then only insofar as we will come together to make them so by our own effort, taking all the risks of failure because, win or lose, the thing is worth the risk.

7.

Play? Community discovers new ways to enjoyment. Many a man who never handled a spade in peace time has discovered a solid satisfaction in digging a war-time cabbage patch with his neighbours of an evening.

Community is creative. It lets loose the imagination that the least likely amongst us is liable to hide under his hat. In every group there is pretty certain to be local talent: community finds it and liberates it for the enjoyment of all.

So long as there is anyone in the neighbourhood with a passable voice, a way with a fiddle, a gift for impersonation or a flair for stagecraft, community

can make its own amusements instead of sitting dumbly and waiting to be amused. It gives vitality and colour and value to the leisure of life instead of doping them to death with mechanised entertainments. In the end it begins to rub out the dividing line between work and play—for we never work harder than we do at our hobbies and there is no occupation so enjoyable as a job of work you can put your heart into.

8.

Worship? Some of us maybe have never set much store by religion, associating it simply with the idea of half-empty churches, half-understood phrases and orders of service that seemed somehow to have little relation to the everyday life we were up against.

But it matters still that One who spoke with a strange authority once told the men and women who gathered around Him: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” It is said also that the common people—like you and me and the folk next door—heard him *gladly*.

9.

Many, during these past years—sometimes in moments of acute stress—have begun to find for themselves something of the meaning behind those tremendous words. But at all times through the centuries, those who have “heard him gladly” have discovered that a new way of life was beginning to open up within them and around them—a way in which their neighbour had also his part and place.

We too—if we are going to get down to the bed-rock of community, to build upon a foundation that will take the stresses of the years ahead—we too must listen.

10.

Now, in times when every turning brings us face to face with a new problem, we have need to find the Way. Now, when we have come to doubt so many dogmas and to disbelieve so many slogans, we have need to know the Truth. Now, where the shadow of death, violent and ruinous, has fallen upon our world, we need above all to re-discover Life.

And in this also we can get together to seek and to find, not troubling at all about the names and the labels that so often keep people of goodwill apart.

*“Community”—what does it mean?
—how does it work?*

COMMUNITY is not a religion or a movement or a social form. It is a relationship, with God, with man and with all created things. As a way of life it can find fulfilment amongst any group of friends, any association of neighbours or any social organism within the body of society.

What is known as a *community* can be any group that voluntarily expresses or tries to express the principles of Community. Please note that it does *not* necessarily involve living in one house or sharing the same hut. For most of us, it will imply a

simple comradeship, satisfying the normal desire for home, family and neighbourly associations. It may consist of a team of half-a-dozen people; an association numbering hundreds; a body of friends within a village, an urban area or a neighbourhood.

It may take shape in a place of worship or a place of employment, in a farm or at a workbench, as a school, a club, a centre or a service, in a city or in the country. Its forms and patterns will be very various but the same general principles in one shape or other and in varying measures will underlie them all.

In varying measure:—for many of the ventures described in the section entitled *How Community Works* are no more than the first exploratory steps, the simplest ABC of the matter. But it is better for any little group of people to begin at the beginning rather than to outrun the vision, the initiative and the courage of its members. Achievement opens up wider horizons. The group must feel its feet before it can walk and walk before it can run.

There will be many failures in the exploration of community. Few things that matter much are easy and community matters a great deal. No way of life is harder or more worth while. Better to try and fail and try again and again than never to make a venture into real living.

Hard as it may be, this venture is possible to all. It seeks to create "cells of good living in the chaos of our world."* "It gives ordinary men and women something to work on. It is concrete instead of abstract politics."† It is a revolution that begins with ourselves and works within our own circle and outwards from it. It can take shape where we are. It can start now.

Some Characteristics of Community

1. COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

Community is concerned with people first and with things in their relation to people. It starts with persons and builds up institutions: it does not start with institutions and build down to persons.

It puts co-operation, sharing and service in place of competition, self interest and exploitation. It creates a place of meeting and sees the common good as the only kind of profit worth striving after.

Relationships in community take no count of differences of race, social class, political opinion, education or sectarian background. They accept people for themselves—for what they are—and for what they may become.

Because it is a voluntary association of free people, true community is also true democracy and, as such, its concern is for the growth of good families, good neighbours and good citizens. It sees the home as the centre of society but it realises that no society can live and grow out of a collection of isolated homes. The family is the nucleus of a larger family.

It is committed to the service of need—whether the needs affect people or things. It answers the immediate call with the means ready to hand.

It does this by meeting people on the level and

working *with* them as comrades and friends; not just by reaching down a helping hand from some safe and privileged position.

It believes that making a good thing is more satisfying than making a big profit. It realises that work can be play and play can be work. It sees that neither leisure nor money have value apart from the way they are used.

It affirms that men live most fully by developing all their latent gifts in the service of the community. Anything that hinders that development or turns it to selfish ends has no part in community and no benefit for the man or for the society in which he lives. It does not regard "security" as a first aim of life. In any adventure for worthwhile ends, it is necessary to take risks and community is an adventure in living.

In whatever form it finds expression, a community can never be an end in itself. It denies its nature insofar as it becomes self-conscious and concerned for its own survival. It is not the community group that matters but the relationships it expresses: not its existence but its service.

Community is and must be voluntary in spirit and in action. It will not seek to impose its principles, its practice or its findings. Insofar as it is successful, it will recommend itself by its life and its work.

2. THE WAY OF COMMUNITY

Men are seldom born with equal gifts and abilities. Their equality in Community is not an equality of service but an equality in *giving* service. Where each gives his best, all give equally.

Community does not live by weights and measures. Its members have grace to take—as well as to give—without grudging. Its sharing should be spontaneous, having no taint of "charity" in the giving and leaving no sense of debt in the acceptance.

Possessiveness and personal pride are the last enemies of community. Put out at the front door, they are apt to come in again at the back, disguised as possessiveness of a personal job or function in the community; pride of leadership or of superior skill; a competitive desire to use gifts for self-glorification instead of the service of the community.

Money exercises strange compulsions. It must be kept in its place whenever and wherever it comes into the life of a community. It must never be allowed to influence the decision or to coerce the action of a group. Nor must it determine its objectives. If the objectives are sound, ways and means will be found for their achievement.

The freedom of the individual in community is freedom to act in any way that does not deny his own conscience, that will not limit the freedom or outrage the conscience of his fellows, and that will fulfil his responsibilities to them and to his daily task. A leader in community is not a dictator but a servant—the man whose shoulders are broad enough to carry the burdens of responsibility; the one who has most to offer in wisdom and experience and who gives it freely and unconditionally.

Every attempt to achieve community should begin at its beginnings and grow up as it goes. It will be

* Eric Gill.

† John Middleton Murry.

wise not to run before it can walk and not to be unduly discouraged by failures to live up to its vision. A small thing well done is better than a big one well talked about. Something that moves and grows is more useful than are any number of paper plans—it is *alive*.

3. THE LIFE OF COMMUNITY

The particular way in which any community takes shape will depend on the character and the vision of its members. You cannot build a community in terms of a blueprint: it is a living organism and its form will depend upon its life and health.

Members of a community recognize that there is a family relationship between themselves and their neighbour because there is a family relationship—fully made known in Jesus Christ—between each of them and God. They act together in the conviction that this is a fact and not just an idea.

Their sense of community, if it be real, will grow *out* of shared convictions; *with* shared experience and *towards* shared ends.

This means sharing the every-day things—worship, work, resources and capacities—not from a sense of duty but because it is the natural thing for a family to do.

It means working together—each for all and all for each—because that is the only way in which a good family can work and a good job can be done.

It means trusting one another and being worthy

of trust. But also making allowances for your neighbour if he slips up.

Its disciplines are the self-disciplines of those who realise their responsibilities for others besides themselves; its compulsions are those of goodwill and those are the strongest compulsions in the world.

It means serving without counting on a reward: members serving one another; the group serving society.

It keeps both eyes on the job in hand instead of having one eye on a personal advantage. That means a better job for everyone concerned and better fun in doing it.

It understands that a benefit gets bigger when it is shared and not smaller; that a common good by which everyone gains is better than a personal gain by which somebody else loses.

It sees that the things that belong to everybody have more importance than the things that belong simply to oneself: therefore it looks after common property as carefully as most of us look after our own.

It pools its strength in all the daily difficulties of life and work: the stronger lends a hand and the weaker takes hold and both go forward together.

It faces its problems squarely and in the open; it deals with them frankly and with understanding; it solves them fairly with forgiveness and with goodwill. This applies equally whether the problems concern people or circumstances.